DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 266 CS 013 449

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TITLE Structuring Support for Change in the Middle Years Literacy Program.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Change; *Literacy; *Middle Schools; Models; Professional Development; Program Design; *Reading Instruction; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Improvement; Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that the idea of "taking stock" of the current program--reflecting on what educators believe to be best practice--and then "charting a course" of action to better align practice with vision is a deliberate way for teachers to build capacity to enact reform. It begins by providing a brief overview of the changing direction of middle years literacy programs; an overview that sets the context for a survey that asked teachers to first determine the perceived importance of what are often viewed as key features of a quality literacy program, and then to determine how well their current program and practices were aligned. The findings from this teacher survey, supported by similar surveys of teachers' perceived needs for support, form the basis for the development of a model to help schools and districts assess the array of educational changes facing teachers, and to strategically plan various types of support for assisting teachers to successfully change curriculum and instructional practice. Contains 16 references, the survey instrument, and a figure illustrating aligning innovations and teacher support. (RS)

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Structuring Support for Change in the Middle Years Literacy Program

by

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Paper presented at the American Education Research Association Annual Meeting, Montreal, Canada -- April 23, 1999

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Structuring Support for Change in the Middle Years Literacy Program

> . . . building teachers' capacity to enact reform means more than helping them gain additional understanding and skill; it also means encouraging them to alter the goals they hold for their students and to change the way they see themselves (p. 20). (Floden, R., Goertz, M. and O'Day J., 1995)

The rapidly changing needs of students and society create curriculum reform challenges for all educators who are striving to prepare students for a world of tomorrow that all of us can but only imagine. As Floden et al so aptly state, helping teachers to be successful in preparing every student attain the literacy skills and appreciation's that will be the foundation for their future will require many teachers to change the way they see themselves. This implies an examination of what are viewed as the essential learnings students will need, how best a teacher can help them reach their goals, and what types of instructional practices and learning environments will best facilitate the process. The idea of "taking stock" of your current program -- reflecting on what you believe to be best practice -- and then "charting a course" of action to better align practice with vision is a deliberate way for teachers to build capacity to enact reform. This paper begins by providing a brief overview of the changing direction of middle years literacy programs; an overview that sets the context for a survey that asked teachers to first determine the perceived importance of what are often viewed as key features of a quality literacy program, and then to determine how well their current program and practices were aligned. The findings from this teacher survey, and supported by similar surveys of teachers' perceived needs for support, form the basis for the development of a model to help schools and districts assess the array of educational changes facing teachers, and to strategically plan various types of support for assisting teachers to successfully change curriculum and instructional practice.

Middle Years Literacy Programs: The Evolving Vision

Because middle schools today reflect a diversity of students with varied interests, cultural identities, learning styles and abilities all of whom are coming to grips with their personal transitions into adolescence, the literacy program must be shaped by instructional and assessment practices, and by a challenging learning environment that supports every student. Teachers of the language arts, like those in other academic disciplines, are challenged to help students acquire the content knowledge, and the essential skills associated with their discipline that will allow them to become independent learners. Middle years teachers undertake this challenge knowing there has been a significant shift in thinking regarding how this can best be accomplished.

The essence of a quality middle years literacy program is best portrayed as 1) differentiated and connected; 2) providing appropriate instruction/assessment practices; and 3) grounded in an interactive learning community where student voice is recognized. These program features reflect an evolving view of educational practice that has occurred over the past decade across many academic disciplines. Heald-Taylor (1996) explained this shift by proposing a continuum for conceptualizing curriculum, one that moves from viewing curriculum as fact, to curriculum as activity, and finally to curriculum as inquiry. In many respects, the view of curriculum as inquiry exemplifies the direction many middle schools are taking.

A growing number of middle years literacy teachers support this vision of the essential features of a quality literacy program, seeing it as a welcome and long overdue event. For others, the expectations to shift toward a more student-centered literacy environment, and to make the accompanying curriculum and instructional adjustments, may be a stressful challenge. Teachers undertaking this type of curriculum change must first embrace the notion that such changes will in fact better accommodate students' literacy needs and, secondly, be convinced that the proposed framework can be successfully implemented. Although it is critical for teachers to be at the forefront of advocating for changing language arts instructional practice they cannot make the shift

alone. Teachers need varying types and levels of support from school administrators, district personnel, parents, and the community to implement this changing view of a quality literacy program for young adolescents.

One of the most important issues facing teachers in our middle and high schools is the issue of helping students become engaged in their work and having a sense of what Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez, (1989) refer to as "school membership". Recent research has identified the importance of social bonding as an important factor for students staying in school, and describes a state in which a student is (1) attached, (2) committed, (3) involved and has (4) belief in the norms, activities and people of an institution (p.117). When teachers present non-motivating course work, create a mis-match between student's learning preference and instructional practice, or have as their primary focus "covering the course" with little recognization of individual student needs, the results are often student disengagement. Against this backdrop of the social dimension of schooling, middle years teachers are taking stock of their current practice and are looking for varying kinds of support to bring about changes that will truly engage students as members of the classroom community.

Taking Stock of Your Current Program

One of the first tasks facing teachers who are contemplating any type of program change is to take stock of their current practice to determine what, if anything, needs adjustment. In other words, where are you now? What should be held and what changes, if any, should be considered? Lastly, how can changes be successfully implemented? It is important to keep reminding ourselves that we are not undertaking curricula change for the sake of fad or trend, instead any curriculum change must be undertaken with the expressed purpose of improving the learning opportunities of students.

Some middle years literacy teachers may embark on this process of assessing their practices feeling quite confident that they are currently providing a comprehensive program, while others may be less confident in their efforts to offer a quality program for all students. Many teachers may find it helpful to use some form of assessment guide that helds them create a profile of their current literacy programs; a profile that will give direction to any adjustments that need to be made. The program assessment instrument (Figure 1) used in this survey of middle years teachers does not contain a calibrated scoring system in which the responses are totaled to reflect a 'program quality level'. Nor do the statements in the guide appear in any hierarchical order of importance. They do, however, represent many of the program considerations teachers need to make when designing a comprehensive student-centered literacy program.

Figure 1 N=30

Middle Years Literacy Program Assessment Guide

Instructions: Determine the relative importance of each statement and then compare it with what you know, or perceive to be, is current practice
Rating Scale:
1 -- of little importance and not currently evident in practice
4 -- very important and very evident in current practice N=30

Instruction - Assessment Practices	Relative Importance 1 2 3 4	Current Status 1 2 3 4
1. Instructional practices are adjusted and varied to accommodate student diversity	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
2. A broad range of instructional strategies are used to help students acquire literacy competencies	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
3. You are knowledgeable about and use specific instructional strategies to promote students' metacognitive skills and higher level thinking skills	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
4. You assume varied roles in the classroom (e.g. model, coach, facilitator)	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
5. You are aware of and adjust for the varied learning preferences of your students	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
6. You are knowledgeable about pre-reading strategies and view helping students "prepare for reading" as an important aspect of the instructional process	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
7. Specific interactive practices such as "literature circles" and "book talks" have a significant place in the literacy program	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
8. You provide specific accommodations to assist the "lower-achieving" readers and writers	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
9. You help students to build literacy connections through deliberate integration of the language arts strands	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
10. Authentic assessment strategies are used to complement instructional practices (e.g. use of portfolios)	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4

Curriculum	Relative Importance 1 2 3 4	Current Status 1 2 3 4
1. Integrated or interdisciplinary units of study form the organizational framework for instruction	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
2. Flexibility of student choice regarding the instructional resources used is a key component of the program	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
3. Instructional resources are available and matched with students' reading levels and interests	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
4. A wide variety of instructional resources are used e.g. - trade books, newspapers, magazines, etc.	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
5. The curriculum offers students an opportunity to see real world connections in what they are learning e.g. - themes in novels related to their lives - students practice technical reading/writing	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
6. Students are actively engaged in reading and writing activities for extended periods of the school day	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
7. Helping students acquire literacy competences across the curriculum subject areas is a shared responsibility of all teachers	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
8. Technology has a role to play in assisting students acquire literacy competencies e.g. - word processing software programs - internet and other information access tools	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
9. Viewing and drama are forms of communication that may be included as strands of literacy in a holistic middle years literacy program	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4

Learning Environment	Relative Importance 1 2 3 4	Current Status 1 2 3 4
1. Your classroom organization is flexible to support the instructional needs of students e.g. - varied instructional groupings - independent and small group activities	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
2. Your classroom reflects the concept of a "community of learners" e.g. - students sharing literacy experiences - samples of students' work on display - students are in a resource-rich setting	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
3. Your classroom presents a safe, equitable, supportive and motivating climate for learning	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4
4. Extended-period time tabling is used to bring flexibility to the program and to ease time constraints	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4

Summary of the Survey Responses

A small group of middle years teachers have used this survey guide to take stock of their own literacy programs. It was encouraging to find that teachers in this sample believe that many attributes described as the evolving vision of a comprehensive literacy program for young adolescents were not only endorsed as being essential, but were felt to be integral parts of their present programs. Teachers in this sample felt they were doing well with adjusting classroom experiences to reflect varied learning preferences of their students, and in their ability to provide a safe, equitable, supportive, and motivating climate for learning. Although these teachers clearly recognized the importance of modifying aspects of their literacy instruction, they also recognized a lack of alignment between some aspects of their current instructional practices and what they perceived to be most beneficial to accommodate the literacy needs of all their students. It appears that many of the key elements of an exemplary middle years literacy program that call for redefining the relationships and roles of both teachers and students in the upper elementary and middle years are philosophically embraced by the majority of those surveyed in this sample of middle years teachers and administrators. Yet, these educators also believed that some of the important elements of a quality literacy program need attention.

Gaps in Practice

Teachers perceived gaps between their current practice and what they identified as important for a quality program in areas related to:

* Organizing the learning environment to be flexible to support the instructional needs of all students and to create the idea that the classroom is in reality a "community of learners";
* Developing integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum experiences for students that accommodate the need for student choice;
* Creating a literacy program that offers flexibility of student choice related to the use of instructional resources;
* Implementing instructional practices that help students "prepare for reading" through interactive discussion practices like brainstorming; and
* Aligning authentic assessment strategies to complement instructional practices.

It is important to exercise caution in generalizing results from a small sampling; however, these teachers' views do appear to represent the views of many educators experiencing similar large-scale program innovations across North America. As teachers re-conceptualize their programs to better accommodate students' diverse learning needs, the question arises as to how best to assist them in making the transitions they envision are needed to improve their programs.

Charting the Course: Bringing the Vision into Practice

The term "reform" is used by educators to describe any number of changes in the public educational system. Within the curriculum and instruction context, the term implies a desire to reshape or redesign programs of study and accompanying instructional practices in order to improve learning for all students. The direction these changes in curriculum and instruction have taken in recent years is in part due to new understandings about the learning process, and in part due to a collection of external pressures for change that are being exerted upon the educational system from many directions. In the words of high school teacher Jo Vogel, reshaping and redesigning literacy programs to bring the vision into practice is grounded in the belief that "yesterday's students are never today's, nor today's students tomorrow's --- curriculum is never one-size-fits-all nor does it have a long shelf life." For whatever reasons, calls for change demand innovative and creative ways of meeting the evolving vision of a quality school curriculum.

How do teachers believe they can best bring about changes to their own programs? To begin with it is well known that efforts to change practice are only successful when people make a personal commitment and believe in the reasons for the change. Without individual teacher commitment to take up the challenges, little, if any, change will occur. Udall and Rugen (1997) voice what many educators believe is at the heart of real and sustained change in practice saying that "when teachers view themselves as learners, they enhance their capacity to reflect on their craft in ways that help them do it better" (p. 404). Expressed in a slightly different way, Lieberman (1995) argues that we need to rethink the authentic opportunities that we give teachers to learn. Teachers who have formulated a clear vision of their middle years literacy program, complemented by strategies for aligning current and evolving practice, model the leadership that empowers colleagues to, in turn, reflect upon where they are along the path of change. Because the types of support needed along this path of change

will vary with each individual, what constitutes authentic opportunities to learn will vary from teacher to teacher.

In many ways the results from the survey used in this study of middle school literacy teachers parallel those of other studies of teachers at both the primary and the middle years level who are actively involved in large-scale literacy change initiatives. Responses from two such studies provide some direction as to the types of support teachers felt would be most beneficial to help them reach a level of comfort with new literacy curricula expectations (Hosking, 1991, Tebbutt, 1998). In both these studies, teachers were asked the usefulness of the following types of support services:

* intensive workshops, seminars, conferences on a broad overview of literacy topics
* year long series of workshops on selected literacy topics of their choice
* school time to observe and interact with colleagues
* access to consultative services upon request for advice and modeling
* school time to plan with colleagues
* participation in a teacher network who meet regularly to discuss literacy issues
* time set aside each week for personal planning during the school day

Many of the teachers responding to the surveys in these studies expressed their preference for support in the form of personal and collaborative planning time being structured into the regular school week. Additionally, in both these studies there was considerable support for the idea of having opportunities to visit with other teachers for observations and for exchanging ideas. Networks of peer support were also viewed as being useful. This strongly identified need for personal time to plan and for coming to grips with the expectations for change, mirror what Joyce and Calhoun (1995) remind us is the essence of school renewal; a process that is created from within and moves towards a "fluid inquiry into how to make education better day to day" (p. 51). Across the

country researchers of the educational change process and staff development specialists report this same overriding concern by teachers -- there is "no time to routinely learn together, [and] no time for teachers to reflect on their teaching practices together" (Murphy, 1997, p. 29). Vojtek and O'Brien Vojtek (1997), reporting on a study of five Portland, Oregon school districts state that "time is the one factor that was mentioned by every single person interviewed" (p.58). On the opposite side of the scale there was much less support for faculty in-service, either site-based, or by way of conferences or workshops.

Access to the intangible resources of time and visible support from district personnel for their efforts, rise to the top as the essential elements that, for many teachers, will help them to be successful. More and more school districts are being creative in helping teachers find time. By encouraging teachers to join listservs and internet discussion groups schools districts are attempting to help teachers create their own support networks. Many schools are re-structuring the day to provide early release times or later morning starts thereby creating for teachers time to plan and to share. Of course these strategies for finding time within the school day are not solely designed for teachers of the language arts since all teachers are constantly being challenged to reflect on their practice and to stay current in their field. This need for time to talk with colleagues and to constantly re-assess programs impacts teachers in the middle years literacy program from multiple perspectives. Not only do they have a vested interest in influencing the literacy learning experiences for students within the language arts subject area, they also have an investment in the literacy opportunities for students across the entire curriculum.

Although many school faculties undertaking change in teaching practice have similarities, each is, in turn, unique. As middle years literacy teachers move towards initiating more student-centered instruction and assessment practices they need a comprehensive system of support designed to build shared ownership and responsibility among teachers, building administrators, and district staff.

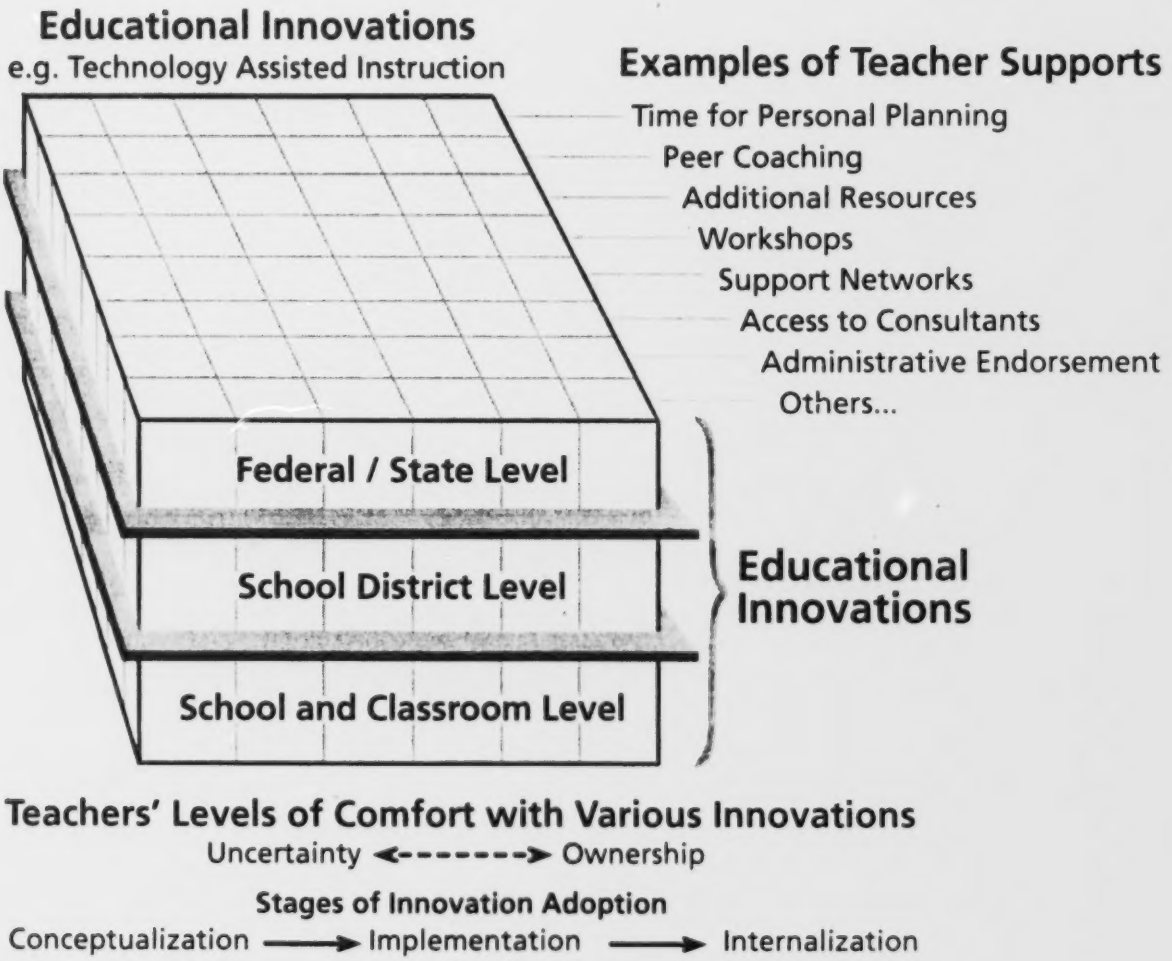
Planning Educational Change

Stiegelbaurer (1994), writing about the change process, believes that change itself has changed and calls for multiple approach support frameworks that involve people, processes, practices, and policies all aimed at facilitating a shift in educational practice. Substantiating this perspective is the growing evidence that reforms in middle schools, implemented independently, result in little or no significant gains in student achievement (Ligsitz, Jackson, Meyer Austin, 1997). These authors believe that "not until a critical mass of reform is in place and operating together in an integrated manner do significant positive changes in student outcomes occur" (p. 519). For example, moving to extended period days with built-in time for student-teacher conferencing on a regular basis are organizational changes that complement and facilitate the implementation of a literature study program or extended in-class writing projects. As language arts teachers contemplate changes in their program, awareness of the multi-dimensional aspects of successful change must not be overlooked.

Educational organizations are designed to be stable rather than dynamic, with even the simplest of educational changes requiring that we not only deal with the innovation itself but also with creating conditions that will sustain the change (Lee, V., Bryk, A., and Smith, J., 1992). Writing about schools as "self-renewing systems", Joyce, B., Wolf, J., and Calhoun, E. (1993) remind us that educational change is a responsibility shared with teachers by the school site administration and the district office. Over the past two decades we have learned a great deal about successfully implementing and sustaining large scale education changes such as the new vision for the middle years literacy curriculum. From this body of literature on change comes a clear picture that it is a constantly evolving, multidimensional process and not a simplistic, linear set of events. The following three dimensional model -- Aligning Innovations and Support-- (Figure 2), offers a way to visualize the array of innovations that are constantly descending upon teachers from various directions, and illustrates that different innovations may best be supported in different ways.

Figure 2.

Aligning Innovations and Teacher Support



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School administrators and other district level staff developers will quickly recognize through this matrix model that teachers may need to access different types of support for difficult innovations in order to attain a level of comfort. Many teachers faced with a re-conceptualizing of the middle school literacy curriculum will need time and various individualized types of support for them to move to the stage of internalizing the change. Joyce and Calhoun (1995) help in the formulation of the challenge facing middle school literacy teachers by suggesting that it is essential to build:

> . . . comprehensive approaches to innovation that move away from the fragmented, single-initiative approaches . . . and [that] we must elevate the content, processes, and social organization of staff development and school improvement so that all spheres of the organization are served in an integrated manner". (p. 17)

Mobilizing the support necessary to bring about and sustain complex educational changes such as those envisioned in the middle years literacy curriculum will require some strategic planning at both the school and the district level. A significant part of this planning process involves first assessing teacher needs, and then aligning these needs with appropriate support structures. The key ingredients to successful curriculum change blend the creation of flexible support structures that promote a positive climate for school level change, coupled with teachers' personal desires to make adjustments in their own programs.

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